

On the Meaning of “Faith (信)” in Early Chan School

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Abstract

Kanhua Chan investigates a specific gongan 公案 or hwadu 話頭, gives rise to a doubt-mass from it, reaches the state of no division between the doubt-mass and gongan before achieving final enlightenment. Based on the faith in original enlightenment, such methodology is in turn considered the actualization of the faith. At all events Chinese Chan, whether before or after the emergence of Kanhua Chan, is centered around the faith.

This article examines the meaning of ‘faith’ suggested in the early Chinese Chan School from Bodhidharma to Daoxin 道信 (580-651), and further investigates the perspectives of ‘faith’ in the original enlightenment proposed in the Mahayana tradition and the Chan training system of the Song Dynasty.

The meaning of faith in Chinese Chan school is summarized as follows:

- 1. Faith in the Way, or faith in the Buddhist Way*
- 2. Faith in self (on the ground that self and others have the same Buddha nature)*

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3. Faith in the sitting meditation (three prerequisites for the training of Kanhua Chan)

4. Faith in the Buddhas and patriarchs

Since Kanhua Chan takes the view of actualizing enlightenment rather than original enlightenment, it may seem to develop from faith to practice, and then to actualization by stages; but ultimately it is an attempt to acquire self-faith through a gongan. The faith put forward in Kanhua Chan involves doubt (or a thorough self-criticism), which is in turn derived from the faith.

From the standpoint of Kanhua Chan, the faith suggested by the early Chan masters like Bodhidharma involves the idea of sudden enlightenment, while in Kanhua Chan that is used as the confidence or belief in the doctrine, showing similarities to that of early Buddhism.

Key words: Faith, Observation, Kanhua chan, Bodhidharma, Daoxin.

I. Introduction

The history of Chinese Chan Buddhism can be divided into two periods, the first (? -959) from Bodhidharma until the late Tang Dynasty when the Five Houses 五家 unfolded actively, the second from early Song Dynasty when Kanhua Chan 看話禪 (Kor. Ganhwaseon) was organized and developed until the Yuan 元 and the Ming 明 Dynasty.

When we view Chan as a device for actualizing enlightenment, the logic of enlightenment suggested in the first period had already involved some factors of Kanhua Chan before it emerged full-scale during the second period. In other words Chinese Chan continued to develop maintaining Kanhua methods in it from the first on. As a denomination of Mahayana Buddhism, Chinese Chan evidently put forward the concept of original enlightenment, but it breaks through the gate of original enlightenment and further develops into the very actualization of (original) enlightenment. Although it may seem

extremely simplified, the former Chinese Chan is centered on the faith in original enlightenment, while the latter starts from the faith in materializing enlightenment and returning to the original place.

As is widely known, Kanhua Chan investigates a specific gongan 公案 or hwadu 話頭, gives rise to a doubt-mass from it, reaches the state of no division between the doubt-mass and gongan before achieving final enlightenment. Based on the faith in original enlightenment, such methodology is in turn considered the actualization of the faith. At all events Chinese Chan, whether before or after the emergence of Kanhua Chan, is centered around the faith.

This article examines the meaning of ‘faith’ suggested in the early Chinese Chan School from Bodhidharma to Daoxin 信道 (580-651), and further investigates the perspectives of ‘faith’ in the original enlightenment proposed in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and the Chan training system of the Song Dynasty.

II.

The general idea of ‘faith’ in the fundamental Buddhism is seen in Pali *saddha*, and in Sanskrit *śraddha*. Here *saddha* is understood not as a religious faith but as one involving conviction. Faith is a factor of purifying mind and has profound philosophical implications. Faith means the understanding and assurance of the Four Noble Truths; the worship and reverence of the Buddha’s character and teachings; a sincere decision to practice the Buddha’s teaching; and the realization of the human morality or ethics (*A commentary on the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, 大智度論). In the Abhidharma Buddhism, faith implies the purity of mind (*The Abhidharmakosa-bhasya*, 阿毘達磨俱舍論). Among the Sevenfold Sublime Treasures (七財)—faith, moral discipline, conscience, shame, learning, charity, meditation, and wisdom—the first is faith treasure; among the Five Spiritual Powers (五力)—the power of faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—faith also numbered first.¹ The faith

(*pasanna*, pure faith) mentioned above is what arises toward Tathāgata, and is a solid one from uncontaminated origin. Besides, as the first among the Five Wholesome Roots (*indriya*, 五根), the faith has the power to give rise to essential spiritual faculties like effort (勤), mindfulness (念), concentration (定), and wisdom (慧). Thus, the faith can get rid of greed, hatred, delusion, slackness, and restlessness. The *Vibhāsa-sastra* 毘婆沙論 says, "What do you mean by the liberation through faith (信解脫)? By means of faith, one can observe faith; by following faith, one can attain faith. Those sticking to the former can observe the faith in his cultivation on the basis of his faith in achieving the Way. Those sticking to the latter can achieve his faith-fruits since he continues his faith in the Way. Hence, the liberation through faith" (T.28.217b). [問曰 何故名信解脫。答曰 以信觀信 從信得信。以信觀信者以見道信觀修道信。從信得信者從向道信得果道信。是名信解脫。] In this way, faith is in itself the direct liberation while retaining the illumination of mind.

As for the theoretical aspect of faith, the *Awakening of the Mahayana Faith* provides us with some information. The title of the book itself neatly summarizes its whole contents. Its prefatory statement says as follows:

When sentient beings want to remove doubts and evil attachments, they should give rise to the right faith so that the seed of Buddhahood may not disappear. [爲欲令衆生 除疑捨邪執 起大乘正信 佛種不斷故。]

As can be seen, in order for the seed of buddha-nature not to be extinct, the 'right faith' in Mahayana should arise. The faith in Mahayana means having faith in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, and the ultimate truth—this faith is equivalent to Mahayana.

In general, there are four stages in Buddhism—faith (信), understanding (解), practice (行), and realization (證). Starting from the faith in the Buddha's teaching, acquiring the Buddha-fruit is a legitimate course leading to the path of enlightenment. The main purpose of the *Awakening of the Faith*,

1 『集異門足論』問信力云何 答於如來所修植淨信根生安住 不爲沙門或婆羅門或天魔梵或余世間如法引奪 (T.26.425c).

however, is “to give rise to faith, so that those unfaithful (不定聚) may be convinced of correct paths (正定聚).” (依未入正定衆生故 說修行信心.) In its chapter of preaching the merits of assiduous cultivation,

Let it be known properly that past Bodhisattvas already attained pure faith relying on the law; present Bodhisattvas also attained pure faith relying on the law; and the future Bodhisattvas attained pure faith relying on the law as well. [當知過去菩薩已依法得成淨信。現在菩薩今依法得成淨信。未來菩薩當依法得成淨信.]

‘The law’ means that of Mahayana (namely, it indicates universal existence as the essence of Mahayana, or the Awakening of the Faith as the doctrine of Mahayana); thus, it is the mind which incorporates the entire realm of the mundane and supramundane. In other words, it is what triggers the deep faith in the possibility of achieving all the good Dharmas. In this manner, in Mahayana Buddhism, faith refers to the entire chain of cause and effect including recognition, estimation, and intention. It is also called as the mind-purifying faith (淨信) compared to the water-clarifying crystal. While such phenomena as the ultimate truth, the Three Gems, and the wholesomeness belong to the realm of faith, faith itself lies in the Mahayana. In conclusion, faith is none other than a faithful mind towards Mahayana.

III.

The principle of Chinese Chan is originally demonstrated in the Two Entrances and Four Practices 二入四行 by Tanlin (Bodhidharma’s disciple). The principle is said to carry relatively true information on Bodhidharma. According to it, Bodhidharma much valued the fourth volume of the *Lankavatara Sutra* since this third-stage Mahayana sutra contains some similarities to his Two Entrances and Four Practices.

Bodhidharma professed himself to be a Mahayana. Accordingly, his Seon should be understood in line with the teachings of Mahayana. As for the two fundamental factors of Chan, ie, cultivation and enlightenment, Mahayana Buddhism stands on the side of original enlightenment. The faith in original enlightenment, forming the basis, reveals itself during the cultivation efforts. Mahayana may be defined as the Buddhism of faith. Then, what significance does the faith have in relation with the Bodhidharma Chan of Mahayana?

Bodhidharma mentioned 'faith' twice in the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* (二入四行論). One is when addressing the principle 'li' (理), which is one of the two entrances (入) of enlightenment. The other, when referring to the Accordance with the Dharma (稱法行), or the last of the 'four practices' (四行). As for the first or the principle, it evidences the faith in all sentient beings' having identical true nature and thus it presents the phrases,

Enlightenment is the realization of the truth by means of the Buddha's teachings, so all the sentient beings should believe deeply in their own possession of the Buddha nature. [理入者 謂藉教悟宗。深信含生同一眞性。]

Here, Buddha's teachings represents those for the truth, that is, the Mahayana scriptures, and the truth indicates such true nature as all sentient beings are equipped with, or otherwise, tathagata-garbha or the Buddha nature. Therefore, realizing the truth is none other than 'having deep faith in the sentient being's possessing the same true nature.' Such deep faith is the very enlightenment (理, 宗). That is to say, the deep faith mentioned in Bodhidharma Chan has the same meaning as the absolute, innate faith, which is equivalent to enlightenment.

The profound faith in true nature, he continued, "doesn't reveal itself if afflictions from outside prevail. So, if one wants to cease them and be his true nature, then firmly abide in wall contemplation." (但爲客塵妄覆 不能顯

了。若也捨妄歸真 凝住壁觀。) ‘To cease afflictions and be one’s true nature’ is indeed the profound faith in the true nature and also is sudden enlightenment. Thus, to firmly abide in wall contemplation is like unfolding sudden enlightenment, which is the very essence of profound faith and the true nature. It can also be described as the state of “no distinction between subject and object, between sentient beings and saints, but merging perfectly into the truth and stillness without any discrimination.” (無自無他 凡聖等一。堅住不移。更不隨於文教。此即與理冥符 無有分別 寂然無爲。) That’s why Bodhidharma said the comfortable mind is a wall contemplation.

The next phrase on faith mentioned in the treatise above appears in the concept of the Accordance with the Dharma, the last of the ‘four practices.’ According to it, “the wise, once they understand this truth, are sure to practice it.” (智者若能信解此理 應當稱法而行。) Here, it is noticeable that practices ensue under the premise of faith and understanding. And this principle is referred to as the ‘formless emptiness, with neither contamination or attachments, nor distinction between this and that’ (此理衆相斯空 無染無着 無此無彼) and also as the ‘pure nature’ (性淨之理). In addition, it is an unshakable faith (決定信) in emptiness as the source of Mahayana and it is a dynamic unfolding of prajna (wisdom). The attaining of such faith entails that all practices become ‘those of the truth itself’ and also become uncontaminated cultivation.

Thus Bodhidharma Chan describes faith as follows: The sudden enlightenment of original nature is explained by means of ‘profound faith’; the unshakable faith in emptiness is in itself the practice of the truth as it really is. In this way, profound faith and profound understanding are explained in terms of enlightenment and practice; and the faith is what involves cultivation and enlightenment concurrently.

Sengcan 僧璨 (?-606), who had inherited Bodhidharma Chan from the Second Patriarch Huike 慧可 (487-593), stated in his writing, the *Seal of the Mind of Faith* (信心銘), his view on Mahayana Chan even clearer than in the

Treatise on the *Two Entrances and Four Practices*. Composed of the verses of 146 passages, it summarizes the fundamentals of Chan into the two letters, 'faith' and 'mind.' Here, the mind indicates the original mind and the faith, a doubtless faith. In addition, this faith does not mean believing some objectified mind; rather, it is a sort of unshakable faith that an ordinary, unenlightened mind is directly the Buddha's mind.

Both faith and mind are not separated, and such non-separation is faith and mind. That is where the path of language is cut off and where there is no past, present and future. [言語道斷 非去來今.]

That state is the world of perfect unity where there is no separation between faith and mind; where there is no way of expression by means of words; or where there is no spatial extension of being or non-being. As faith is a function of mind and mind is the foundation of faith, both their function and foundation are not separated but a unity. Consequently, the faith and mind entails a profound faith as well as a faith and understanding.

Though 'two' comes from 'one,' the one doesn't need to be held fast. If not one mind arises, then all the Dharmas will not be defiled. [二由一有 一亦莫守 一心不生 萬法無咎.]

It means that the relative discrimination between subject or object, oneself or others, and being or non-being may occur from the absolute one, namely the fundamental one but it needs not be attached as well. Practically speaking, the core of *The Seal of the Mind of Faith* is that the ultimate truth is free from difficulty (至道無難), but theoretically, its core is that two comes from one (二由一有). And yet, if the one is held fast, some confrontation arises between the one and many; so, the one should not be attached (一亦莫守). If one mind or one thought arises then it surely is a discrimination, and, if not, that means no fault in every existence. In other words, the essential characteristic of reality (真如實相) reveals itself in the realm of the unhindered mutual inter-penetration between phenomena (事事無礙法界). That

is a world of non-duality between faith and mind. Sengcan's non-duality inherited Bodhidharma Chan which holds the view of the original enlightenment of Mahayana Buddhism.

The 'profound faith' held in Bodhidharma Chan shows itself definitely in the Fourth Patriarch Daoxin's Chan as well. In *Lengjia shiziji* (楞伽師資記), principles of Daoxin's Chan appear clearly. There are two more scriptures containing them: "All the Buddhas adopted mind as their foremost," in *The Lankavatara Sutra* (楞伽經): "A perfect unity of body and mind in samadhi, namely the mind of Buddha-remembrance is the very Buddha while deluded mind is the unenlightened one," (一行三昧 卽念佛心是佛 妄念是凡夫) in the *Saptasatikaprajnaparamita* (文殊說般若經). In his third answer to the five questions, the fourth patriarch mentions enlightened beings' understanding of the phenomena, then their mind's becoming pure and clear as follows:

Neither think about the Buddha, nor cherish any attachment in mind, nor try to see mind, nor try to investigate mind, nor contemplate, nor be distracted, but stay as it really is without moving or residing. Be pure alone and mind will be spontaneously bright and pure in ultimate enlightenment. [信曰, 亦不念佛 亦不捉心 亦不看心 亦不計心 亦不思惟 亦不觀行 亦不散亂. 直任運 亦不令去 亦不令住. 獨一清淨 究竟處心自明淨 云云.]

When one forsakes the calculation and artificiality of mind, and becomes natural, the ultimate one-mind of original purity will be exposed with spontaneously illuminating purity.

Continuing his answer to the fourth question on seeking for the Western Pure Land,

If one, Daoxin says, knows that mind is originally pure and neither arising nor ceasing, then that state is the Buddha land and requires no West Pure Land. The Avatamsaka Sutra says innumerable eons are a thought-moment, and a thought-moment is innumerable eons; one direction heads for countless directions, and countless directions, one direction. Of course, the Buddha said, "Seek for the

West," but that is for the dull faculties but not for the sharp. [信曰若知本來不生不滅 究竟清淨 即是佛國土 更不須向西方. 華嚴經云, 無量劫一念 一念無量劫 須知一方無量方 無量方一方 佛爲鈍根衆生 令向西方 不爲利根人說也.]

Consequently, once knowing (知) that mind is originally pure, then it will be revealed that the mind is the Buddha, obviating the seek for the West. Here if one considers the 'know' as merely an understanding, it is impossible to say, 'mind is the Buddha land'; instead, the 'know' obviously involves a profound faith in enlightenment.

Daoxin continues,

According to Chan Master Zhimin, those learning the Way should have their knowledge and practice complemented together. Once one knows both the origin of mind and all the essence-function relations, then one can see the truth clear and pure, can be free of all doubt, and then can achieve virtuous karmas. [又古時智愍禪師訓曰 學道之法 必須解行相扶. 先知心之根源 及諸体用 見理明淨 了了分明無惑 然後功業可成.]

Here, both 'know' (知) and 'see' (見) are suggested as prior experiences, and mean the realization (證). Mere knowledge and seeing, however, can't be called true 'understanding' (解), since the latter is based on the realized or enlightened knowledge and seeing. Among the three—practice, understanding, and actualization (or realization)—of the four paths to enlightenment, the understanding is viewed as intellectual, reasonable, or abstract. In actuality, 'realization' reveals itself as 'understanding' on the basis of knowledge and seeing. Only when this 'understanding' is considered as a clear, enlightened understanding or as the seeing of the truth, can 'understanding' be safely said to be a realization, and vice versa.

Daoxin suggests five principles for Chan practitioners, among which the first two emphasize the advance knowledge on the essence and function of mind.

- 一者 知心体 体性清淨 体與佛同
二者 知心用 用生法寶 起作恒寂 萬惑皆如
三者 常覺不停 覺心在前 覺法無相
四者 常觀身空寂 內外通同 入身於法界之中 未會有碍
五者 守一不移 動靜常住 能令學者 明見佛性 早入定門

First, one should know the essence of mind. It means realizing that the fundamental of our mind is originally pure and is the same as the Buddha's. (一者 知心体 体性清淨 体與佛同.) Second, one should know the function of mind, by means of which all the Dharma treasures arise; even if they do, they are completely empty; all kinds of doubts are the same as well. (二者 知心用 用生法寶 起作恒寂 萬惑皆如.) Third, one should always be enlightened. The enlightened mind is present before but the enlightened phenomenon has no form. (三者 常覺不停 覺心在前 覺法無相.) Fourth, one should always observe that the body is completely empty. Though the body exists in the Dharma realm, it has no hindrance, interpenetrating between inside and outside. (四者 常觀身空寂 內外通同 入身於法界之中 未會有碍.) Finally, one should maintain oneness, without being disturbed. (五者 守一不移.)

The oneness mentioned above indicates a whole-heartedness with which one pays attention to the emptiness of body. Those who follow this way can see their Buddha nature and enter the gate of extinction (calmness). In this way, Daoxin's observation is the same as enlightenment.

After preaching the five principles of his Chan, he continues,

One should know this—namely, that one's self is like the moon in the water, like a reflection in a mirror, like shimmering heat wave, or like an echo resounding in a hollow valley. It may exist, but it can't be investigated; it may not exist, but nevertheless it always shows itself clearly. The Buddhas' Dharma body is all the same as this. So, one can know the following; one has never lived nor has been dead since infinite eons ago. If one can only gain an insight into this, that is the true repentance and the extinction of bad karmas accumulated for countless eons. However, those having doubt and no faith can never become enlightened. Those who have faith in the practice while keeping such an insight never fail to reach the Way of

no birth and death (*Lengjia shiziji*, chapter on Daoxin, 『楞伽師資記』道信條).

Though the three concepts—knowledge, insight (or observation), and faith—are presented intermingled together at the above statement, they are the same. Daoxin mentions that the Buddhas' Dharma body and the selves of the ordinary, unenlightened are not separate permanently but all alike. In other words, they can't be defined either as being nor non-being, though evidently visible. Or the recognition of them can't be objectified or reified.

In the 97 fasc. of *The Record of the Mirror of Orthodoxy* (宗鏡錄, T48.940a), Daoxin shows Bodhidharma's mind and Buddha nature by means of knowledge (知). This way, Daoxin's knowledge and observation are used as a replacement of Bodhidharma's faith as well as the realization of enlightenment (證).

IV. Conclusion

The meaning of faith in Chinese Chan school is summarized roughly as follows:

1. Faith in the Way, or faith in the Buddhist Way
2. Faith in self (on the ground that self and others have the same Buddha nature)
3. Faith in the sitting meditation (three prerequisites for the training of Kanhua Chan)
4. Faith in the Buddhas and patriarchs

Since Kanhua Chan takes the view of actualizing enlightenment rather than original enlightenment, it may seem to develop from faith to practice, and then to actualization by stages; but ultimately it is an attempt to acquire self-faith through a gongan. The three prerequisites described in the *Mirror of Seon* (禪家龜鑑)—great faith, great effort, and great questioning (doubt)—are

just means for it (namely, acquiring self-faith). The faith put forward in Kanhua Chan involves doubt (or a thorough self-criticism), which is in turn derived from the faith.

From the standpoint of Kanhua Chan, the faith suggested by the early Chan masters like Bodhidharma involves the idea of sudden enlightenment, while in Kanhua Chan that is used as the confidence or belief in the doctrine, showing similarities to that of early Buddhism.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, J=Japanese, S=Sanskrit)

Accordance with the Dharma 稱法行

Actualizing (materializing) enlightenment 始覺

Avatamsaka Sutra (S) 華嚴經

Awakening of the Mahayana Faith 大乘起信論

Chan (C), Seon (K), Zen (J) 禪

Commentary on the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra 大智度論

Daoxin (C) 信道

Doubt-mass 疑團

Essential characteristic of reality 眞如實相

Five houses 五家

Five spiritual powers 五力

Five wholesome roots 五根

Ganhwaseon (K) 看話禪

Huike (C) 慧可

Hwadu (K) 話頭

Kanhua (C) 看話

Kanhua chan (C) 看話禪

Lankavatara sutra (S) 楞伽經

Lengjia shiziji (C) 楞伽師資記

Liberation through faith 信解脫
Ming (C) 明
Mirror of Seon 禪家龜鑑
Original enlightenment 本覺
Record of the Mirror of Orthodoxy 宗鏡錄
Saptasatikaprajnaparamita (S) 文殊說般若經
Seal of the Mind of Faith 信心銘
Sengcan (C) 僧璨
Sevenfold sublime treasures 七財
Song (C) 宋
Tang (C) 唐
Tanlin (C) 曇林
Tathagata-garbha 如來藏
The Abhidharmakosa-bhasya (S) 阿毘達磨俱舍論
Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices 二入四行論
Unhindered mutual inter-penetration between phenomena 事事無礙法界
Yuan (C) 元

Abbreviation

T *Taisho shinshu Daizokyo* 大正新脩大藏經. Japanese Edition of the Buddhist Canon.

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Dazhidulun 大智度論. T.25.57c-756b.
Lengjia shiziji 楞伽師資記. T.85.1283-91.
Zongjinglu 宗鏡錄. T.48.417b-957b.